

Thailand/Cambodia Border Conflict: NGOs call for observers, and end to hostilities

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Jakarta: Thai and Cambodian non-government organisations have jointly called for a ceasefire between the two countries and urged Asean to quickly deploy observers in the disputed border area.

Suntaree Saeng-ging, secretary general of the Thai NGO Coordinating Committee, and Thun Saray, president of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, announced the joint statement, which was signed by some 40 organisations from both countries. They also called on Asean to pay more attention to the plight of displaced people from both countries and to settle the conflict through negotiations.

The current border conflict has forced villagers, especially women and children, to abandon their homes and threatened to prolong the sporadic episodes of violence that started in February. Because soldiers from both sides continue exchanging artillery and small arms fire, it was crucial for Asean leaders to play a leading role in ending the conflict, the two activists said.

Thai and Cambodian NGO representatives attending the Asean Civil Society Conference and Asean People Forum, which are running parallel to the Asean summit here, met with the press to air ideas on how to end the border conflict and on ways the two countries might cooperate.

Participants at the events, organised by the People's Empowerment Foundation, noted that the media should go beyond simply regurgitating the official line of their governments and pay more attention to the suffering of the displaced border villagers.

Pa Nguon Teang, executive director of Radio Voice of Democracy, said it was important to have an independent mechanism for disseminating objective information about the conflict.

Like Thai politicians, Cambodian politicians are exploiting the border conflict for their own political gains, Mr Pa Nguon said.

It will take time for the two countries to keep their politicians from using the border conflict to stir up nationalistic sentiment and to reduce the animosity between the people of the two countries, he said.

Visit Duangkaew, a villager from Phum Srol village in Si Sa Ket's Kantaralak district who participated in a workshop on the sidelines of the Asean People Forum, said border communities did not know who was benefitting from the war.

The fighting has damaged property and made villagers fear for their lives, he said.

The villagers understand that Preah Vihear temple belonged to Cambodia and that the Thai government was insisting that Thailand owned the 4.6-square-km of land around it.

This conflict should be settled through political means and not by force, he said.

Mr Visit said most of the villagers believed the border problem would end once Thailand has a new government.

Meanwhile, the Southeast Asia Women's Caucus on Asean has appealed to regional leaders to urgently provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced villagers along the Thai-Cambodian border.

The letter signed by female NGO representatives from Vietnam, Indonesia and Cambodia will be delivered to Indonesia, the Asean chair, this weekend.

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